

Robert Wolf – ECOLOGY

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Dear friends, this is a continuation of what is getting to be a three part long story that I am sending you in parts. The first was called Control -- which some of you read as a story about chickens and ducks -- it was meant to be about people and our need to control nature and ourselves. The second part was Chaos, the thing we most want to control. This part i call Ecology, although of course all three parts are about ecology.

it is kind of gloomy outside, am inside during the day. I've been thinking--oh, I don't mean just now. Thinking for days, weeks. What I call thinking is sort of juggling things I know around to make sense of something I don't know. That's the only way I learn. Much of what I call thinking goes on outside, when I am gardening, or observing the animals. Or when I look at the clouds to see whether I need to water a few plants that need it. And, as you must know by now, my thinking is wide, the wider the better. Over the years I learned to pay attention to how an unknown fits into a larger almost known. Or, pay attention to what is connected to this unknown.

Give you an example. I have wondered, for instance, about our roosters. In Asian countries i have seen cock fights; those roosters were fierce, mean. The roosters here are mellow. They nver fight with their spurs, they will fly breast to breast for a few seconds, then walk away. The hens are a lot more aggressive than the roosters. Do the roosters here lack testosterone? Apparently enough to fertilize eggs. I have looked on the internet--currently the source of all facts--but have not found much about the basic nature of male chickens. I do know that in cockfights the owners "massage" their fighting cocks before a fight, blow in their ears, or in the beak, and do other things I probably don't see, to make the beast more fierce. Violence is then a matter of training?

Well, yes, that is how we train soldiers. People must learn to kill. That does not come naturally. Some children learn early if they live in a dangerous neighborhood where fighting is what one does. I grew up in a culture where people did not fight each other, that was considered gross, animal-like. I had to learn to fight when I first attended a "white" school.

I do a lot of "wondering." For instance, for now six years I have wondered about the reaction of the American people to the horror of 9/11. I was unprepared for such hyper-emotional feelings of being attacked, invaded, hurt by an unknown force, and easily talked into revenge, war. I saw the same movies on TV (then I still had one). Over and over again. I saw the planes hitting the buildings, fire, then the buildings almost elegantly crumbling into their own footprint. Even a third building--that was not hit--crumbled the same way. I remember thinking "where are the fighter planes?" Surely a city like New York must have more than one air base near enough to send up fighter planes. I also wondered about

how the buildings collapsed so neatly. Remembered a movie I saw of a hotel in Las Vegas that was demolished so that they could put up a bigger and better hotel there. The man talked how complicated it was to place explosive just so, and activate them in a certain sequence. But with the twin towers of the World Trade Center, the impact of a plane, full of fuel, did the same thing. And I remembered that the same buildings had been attacked not long before by some people who had driven a truck loaded with explosives in the underground garage. Those men were captured, tried and sentenced. I remembered that also not long before two American embassies had been attacked in East Africa, and a small boat with explosives had hit a warship in the Persian Gulf a few months earlier? But nobody else seemed to have had the same thoughts, all everyone talked about, on TV and in my neighborhood, the deaths, the idea of using a plane to attack (have we forgotten Kamikaze flyers in WWII?). There was a long time that I could not talk with anyone, I felt. It must have been un-American to not have felt the intense feelings of revenge. Just finished reading a book that gave me, now at this late date, a little more insight in America's reaction to the horror of 9/11. I read Small Wonder by Barbara Kingsolver, a wonderful writer I admire greatly. It is a book of essays, written around that time. I could feel her agony, many feelings, some I could not feel, but obviously a great shock. In those essays she talks a lot about the number of deaths -- although later we heard that the number of people actually killed on 9/11 is less than the number of people killed in auto accidents in New York State in one year. I still wonder other things that I have not heard or read discussed very much. Why the World Trade Center, for instance. If all the purpose of the crazy nineteen had been killing people they could have chosen any of the thousands of high rise apartment buildings. But they chose the WTC. Is it a symbol of how others see America? A nation of trade, a nation that invented globalization, free markets everywhere? A nation that outsourced its manufacturing genius that had made it the richest in the world? I also wondered, and still wonder, what makes people do such a thing. Our Media and our leaders tell us it is because they are religious extremists--but these nineteen were not religious at all, it turns out. Or, we say, "they are mad because we are free." They obviously knew how to use what freedom they had and ours. No, that does not answer my wondering. Maybe now you know a little about my strange kind of thinking.

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Recently, following a thread, came upon another story bemoaning a failing educational system,. Have read several of these after school started around Labor Day. My thought about "education" is that schools are designed to be the expression of a culture, they were invented to teach young folk what we adults wanted them to know about what we held dear. (Today, schools also serve another function altogether: it keeps children busy while both parents are working.) In America, in our so-called pop culture intellect is not one of those ideas we hold dear. All intelligent

Americans (and who isn't?) learned early on to hide how smart they are. That just does not play in school. So, in a culture that is overtly anti-intellectual, how can one expect an educational system to be other than anti-intellectual. And now, with a new law, schools must see to it that their charges memorize facts, because the culture apparently sees facts as necessary for surviving in this strange world. Not true, of course. Everybody learns how to do a job by doing it. There probably are fewer facts now that mean much any more in the 21st century. Geography? It changes. History? Every generation rewrites history. Math? Yes, parts of it are useful in some jobs, but each job requires a different kind of counting and making statistics, accounts, plans.

Educators say, frequently, that education is preparing students for jobs. But the generation of teachers lives in a different world than the world the kids live in, and will live in. The faster a culture changes, the greater the gap between generations.

The article that brought all this up talked a lot about what the writer and "my friend," who is also a teacher and has been for 40 years, about the "dumbing down" of students now (compared to 40 years ago, I guess). They, the author and his friend, blame TV, games played on TVs, computers and those little gadgets kids live with. Oh, and cell phones. And the music they listen to, and the movies they see, and the internet. The usual.

I too think TV an abomination, junk food for the mind. But it is what's happening, man. I am way too old to understand this world. I don't understand, for instance, how we-the-people have allowed this imaginary world to own us so completely. But, again, that is what is.

In other words, if it is true that kids do not do as well in school as the educators want them to do, does not that mean that there is something wrong with what we teach?

My own idea is that an emphasis on "teaching" is not useful. I was lucky, from the beginning I was in a system that believed that schools were to help kids **learn**. Teachers were trained to stimulate us to find our own way to discover the world. We were rarely asked to memorize a list of things, facts, dates. That came later when I had to pass the final exams -- but I figured out the best way for me to memorize. That too is different for different people. So, I think schools (and governments) are an expression of the culture--not the other way 'round. If the culture is dumbed down education is dumbed down also, It may well be that TV and electronic games are bad for the mind as well as the body. But...

Applying my kind of wide thinking, cause and effect are really one process. It is water that makes the river, and it is gravity that moves water. Nobody designed or made a river. It is part of the planet, follows natural or universal laws, although I would prefer to reserve that word, law, for our man-made world. The wonder of the planetary ecology is that it is an almost closed system (it is a closed system fed by the energy of the sun). Water always goes down, but in another form it also rises, forms clouds, rain falls down again. Water also can be solid, snow, ice, that melts and starts a river. This wonderful planet is rock, water, air, and it all

hangs together. Around the planet is a thin shell (thin relative to the size of the planet) we call the biosphere, in which all Life is, from the smallest to the largest, from viruses to elephants, plankton to redwood trees. The planet has twice as much ocean as land, it has mountains, lakes, deserts, forests. And all of that is a oneness, the planetary ecology, in which everything is related to everything else.

Let me mention again that I use the word, world, for our manmade world, that is really in our head. It is our private, individual, reality. I can live in another world than my neighbor. What I see as real may well be other than what you consider reality. The internet is a unique place where all information is available to everyone all the time (supposed to, at least). Quite a unique situation, never known before. And it also means that each of us **chooses** what information we want to add to our own unique reality.

I use the planet to mean Nature--an aspect of the planet--as well as the ball of matter that rotates around its own axis, circles in an ellipse around the sun, in a solar system that races around the galaxy, which in turn wheels through a million billion other galaxies. Nature is not an illusion. When it rains, we both feel it as rain.

You may think it is cool outside when I think cold, because I am used to the tropics. But both of us experience temperature.

I learned to see the planetary ecosystem. Something like a spider web but infinitely more complex. If a third dimensional spider web is hard to imagine; then imagine a four or five dimensional spider web where everything is connected to everything else--and no spider! The multi-dimensional web is a self-contained something like an organism.

Somewhere in our species' history someone, and then many, began to think of one species, or one individual, as more important than the whole. Perhaps hunters? Hunting big animals, predators, they forgot that predators are part of the all. Predators and prey are intimately related. If a predator kills more deer than he can eat, the deer population will diminish, and the predator will starve. If we kill predators, we cause the increase in, for instance, deer populations that then invade suburbs and even cities. In the planetary ecology everything is really connected to everything else. A forest ecology depends on termites and other wood eaters as much as it does not predators, and sunlight, and rain.

Our culture tells us to distinguish things, that can be felt, counted, named, categorized. And perhaps we assume that we add up all the things we get a whole. No, a forest is something else than a bunch of trees. It is harder to grasp as a oneness, but that seems to be important to me at this time. Primitive man always knew the whole, he knew we are part of nature, of All. Indigenous people knew most of that also. Western man has swung all the way to the side of seeing things. Half a century ago physicists were madly searching for the "smallest indivisible particle" so that then the whole universe could be understood. Today scientists have learned that if you look for the smallest indivisible particle you are going to find an endless number of kinds of them, but it does not add to the universe. Now scientists try to see the whole,

with a mathematics I can no longer follow, but I understand at least part of the new concepts.

I think of it as seeing the world of things and the whole, but they are two truths. No truth can replace another. I believe that it is urgent, at this moment in time, to relearn to see the truth of the Whole. The whole of where we live, what we do, where we go; family, friends, animals and plants that are in our life. Then a larger truth, the whole of a city or neighborhood. A larger whole, State or country. And the largest truth, the whole of the planet. All those are truths, of course, but the larger truths are harder to put in our heads, to "see."

Wholes are not pieces strung together, a forest is not known by the number or kind of trees. A forest is a whole, with trees, and undergrowth, and sunlight, wind, rain, vines that climb, mushrooms that grow on rotten leaves, bacteria and mice, and a million other life forms and substances and light and air and water that make up an ecology. The forest is a whole. When I can see the Whole, I know that I am **in** that whole, inextricably.

I learned seeing a world of things, each with names, categories, and in our culture I am told that all these things together make a whole. Very primitive people showed me another truth, seeing the whole. The whole I now see is not the sum of its parts, but it is a Oneness.. Hard to explain in words--words belong to our manmade world. (I have exercises for learning to see the whole, but that is another story.)

Another way of thinking wholes is to think ecosystems. All Life on the planet is a planetary ecology, where everything is related to everything. The planetary ecology has billions of identifiable things that can be given names to -- trees, soil, atmosphere, animals of a million kinds and sizes, humans, plants, funguses, bacteria, viruses. The planetary ecosystem. And what all ecologies, small and large, "do" is maintain a balance. If in an ecosystem one species is increasing at the cost of another species, the whole ecology is effected. In the human organism (a form of an ecology) the sudden growth of a bacterium, or virus, population we call disease, infection. Our body has a miraculous ability to sense where and what is happening, and "sends" white blood cells to the location of the infection. Not only white blood cells, but what we now call our immune system, which has all kinds of ways to restore a manageable balance. What we call health is an ecology in balance, harmony.

The planetary ecology of course has its own kind of immune system. And so it must be "aware" of the sudden explosion of humans on the planet and the damage they have been able to do in the twink of a moment in geological time. A serious sickness to the planet. Ecologists and others have thought of ecologies as organisms. Ecologies, and organisms, have an "intelligence" that is what, for instance, the immune system is. But not only the immune system. Think of the complex process of eating, extracting the nutrients the body needs, in the stomach one process, another process in the small and large intestines. We have a liver that deals with toxins, kidneys that process waste fluids. Think of

something as simple as "seeing." Not simple at all, of course. It is not our eyes that see, we see in our brains. The eyes are just lenses, adjustable for distance and brightness, passing through filtered light waves to centers in the brain, where they are interpreted, and most of the information discarded so that we only are aware of what we need to see. Hearing too is not in the ear, but through the ear. And at the same time the brains as the center where most of the information of nerve cells is processed, sorted, and a little of it we are made aware of. Similar kind of processes must be going on in ecologies, perhaps, probably more complex. If my immune system is a marvel of "intelligence" then surely the defenses of the planetary ecology must have a mega-intelligence that deals with disturbances. The purpose, goal, is always maintaining the best possible balance, harmony. Survival.

What happens when an ecology gets out of balance? It falls apart, it does not survive. If you have ever had an aquarium you learned that you cannot just have a fish in water. There has to be a plant, some rocks, sand, air pumped into the water, the fish needs to be fed. And if you don't scrape the glass from algae or other tiny beings that make the water murky, the tank-water-fish ecology is out of balance. The fish dies, the water smells rotten. The ecology dies.

Note that I use the word intelligence here not in the sense of being intelligent, but rather a whole dynamic system of responses to stimuli. It does not mean smart. Our immune system makes choices. It can make a number of different kinds of responses, it can make a fever or a chill, a local swelling, it can send more blood to a certain spot where the fight is going on (red and puffy skin), blood can coagulate and thereby close a wound, and immediately, instantaneously, the torn skin begins to grow at a fast than normal rate to close a wound. I am certain that the intelligence of an ecology is equally able to make choices, adaptatons of actions, and healing. That does not have to mean there is a will behind it. The "purpose" of life, and a living ecology is survival.

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So, there is a process going on that some people think of as the dumbing down of people and culture, a complex of things happening at the same time, failing educational system, dumber students, a dumber culture, a whole new dimension of learning in cyber space. Not important to consider what or who caused these changes, the dumbing down, if indeed it is that.

This strange idea popped up.

We, modern man, think ourselves separated from the planet, the earth, the rest of Life. We created a world on top of the planet that tries to ignore, sidestep the laws and regularities of the planet. We "use" the planet, it is not part of us. Now things are happening, many seemingly unrelated things, in many layers of our manmade world. Is it important to know who did it? Not really. We must deal with the whole, all of it, as it is.

We may think we are not a part of Nature, but of course we cannot not be. We can put chemicals and batteries and metal bones in or attached to our organic body, but the essence of what we

are is always that we are part of Nature. We, and our works, are interwoven in the All of the planet.

Our world we think apart from nature cannot be apart from All That Is. The one great ecology of the earth must include our plastic and invented materials, and even our invented ideas must be part of the All. Our man-made world cannot be other than a part of the planetary ecology.

Ecologies are constantly adjusting to all the changes that happen in the whole, in order to maintain a sustainable balance. The balance is important. If the balance goes too far in one direction or another, the whole ecology is in danger of breaking. Keeping a dynamic balance is a ground principle of any ecology (or organism). Alcohol transforms in energy in our body, but too much alcohol and not enough of other nutrients destroys the balance, the body breaks. Killing off predators changes the balance in (for us) unexpected (and unwanted) ways. Introducing new species is a tricky experiment, more often than not the introduced species destroys native species or has other effects that we did not foresee. Any messing around with the ecology--one of our favorite pastimes, it seems--has consequences, and we have not learned, nor do we seem very interested in learning, what these consequences might be.

Regardless of what we think or do, the planetary ecology has a "need" to maintain a balance, even when Man cuts half of all the rainforests of the planet, or fouls the air so that the balance of the whole is threatened. Global Warming is demonstrating that something we did (cutting trees, spewing poison into the air) had an effect that is now world-wide. Our burning so much coal and oil these last maybe two or three hundred years is effecting the existing composition of the atmosphere in such a way that more heat gets through to warm up our climate and that effects things like melting of snow and ice, possibly leading to a rise in sea level. It is easy to see these changes needing adjustment in the total ecology. We did not consider the threads, the connections, but of course they were there. You pull one string of a spider web and the whole web shakes and shudders. A spider web needs a spider to fix something gone wrong; in an ecology, or an organism, the spider is part of the whole.

I think it is obvious that the first law of an ecology must be that it must go on, as the first law of Life must be to continue life -- not only the individual, but the species, and not even only the species, but the whole complex of species. The more variety an ecology has, the stronger it is. Meaning the easier it is to regain a balance. The less variety an ecology has, the more fragile it is. When I have a wound, the body as a whole, the organism that is me, does what it knows to do (and can do) immediately. What would the planetary ecology "do" when it became aware that the balance was being seriously endangered? What if the planetary organism has an intelligence that perceives that what endangers the balance of the whole is Man, or more specifically our ignorant experimenting and "doing." it is Man's newly found ability to imagine changes and applying almost unlimited amounts

of energy to make changes. It is machines that do the deed, but humans who invent and guide the machines. What is ultimately behind our destructive acts is our amazingly bizarre idea that we are apart from the planet, that we can make our own world, thank you.

I think it not at all unthinkable that the planetary intelligence does what it can to regain a balance, and to do that it is dumbing down humans. The planetary intelligence is reshaping humans. In our present level of development, Man, is a danger to the ecology it is a part of--and possibly a danger to an even larger ecology of, say, the solar system. Perhaps we have the ability (and the stupidity) to destroy the planet that is our only home.

Perhaps it is also the planetary intelligence that is beating me to make this speech. I am much too old to worry about the future, I have no future. But I am driven to help my fellow humans to wake up. Wake up, people, we are not who and what you think. We are an integral part of All That Is, we are part of the great complex that is our planet. The planet feeds us, gives us shelter, gives us meaning, perhaps grandeur. What do we give back? In an ecology everything is related to everything. The connection from the planet to us, is also a connection from us to the planet.

Early Man, primitive man, knew that. That is how we survived for at least a hundred and fifty thousand years. It is only in the last perhaps ten thousand years that we have blown up our egos, pretending that we are masters of this planet.

We cannot eat more than is good for us, we cannot destroy what need not be destroyed. A civilization, a culture, that is based on the principle of MORE is truly insane. The smallest child of any surviving primitive tribe knows that
WHAT THERE IS IS ALL THERE IS

Or perhaps--and that is saying the same thing--it is not the planetary ecology that dumbs us down, but our own doing by divorcing ourselves from what eyes and ears were meant to do (knowing our environment) by relying on information that is carefully prepared to shape, to conform us to some imaginary model.

How else to explain why we allow the extremes in many spheres of our lives: religion, politics, economics, finances, entertainment, killing and torture. All that is entirely out of balance, too much to one side or the other.

What do we do if in our family one of the children is hard to handle -- not unusual, and usually it blows over, but there are cases...

We give the child tranquilizers, our way to dumb down the inventive and rebellious streak. Why shouldn't the planetary ecology have a similar medicine to rebalance the whole?

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Perhaps this long story helps to rethink the urgent question we ask each other, "what can we DO?"

Perhaps the question we must ask is, What should we NOT do?

We must learn again to be aware, learn to see a whole where we saw only things. Let go our specialness, our unique station above all "other" creation. Our hubris is based on nothing, our arrogance is a set of behaviors we chose to make ourselves feel

good. Whatever it has made a few of us feel, it has led to dangerously lethal effects in the planet we share with all Life.

Flow with the river. Mother Nature knows best.

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Early this morning, before I was fully awake perhaps, I had this image: a wide, slow moving river--deceptive, because underneath the surface there is a powerful current of course. In the river one of those floating mats of debris, tree stumps, vines, plants, and on that mat armies of ants scurrying here and there, fighting each other, fighting other life forms. The floating mat of stuff changes shape, twirls slowly, but all the time moves with the river. Maybe some particularly smart ants can steer the floating mat to one or another shore, get it out of the stream. They succeed getting the float closer to shore, where the river has eddies, that means water actually running upstream, back to the past.

The two currents collapse the mat.

From close up an ecology may look like chaos. The chaos we humans see when we first experience a jungle. We cannot grasp the whole yet. When an ecology breaks, like the break up of the floating mat of stuff in the river, another kind of chaos occurs.

Pieces of what was the mat float away separately.

New ecologies always grow again. This time perhaps without smart ants that can steer their world into eddies at the edge of the river that flow back in time.

I have known, lived among, people who had no government, they were joyful, even happy-- although I am not sure of the meaning of that word.

I have lived among people who had a very strong cohesive culture that guided their own growth and the way they were with each other. What government there was, was mostly the village council, and a very light presence of larger councils and a government. They were content with things as they were, peaceful folk.

The village was really a close knit family whose mantram was "We." Personalities of any kind were scorned, power instinctively feared and avoided where possible.

Not too different from the way most of us live our daily lives.

And occasionally I am rudely reminded that I am of course a cog in the larger machine. I try not to feel that often.

I have also lived among people who were occupied by the force of a neighboring country, a time of endless laws that controlled everything we did, thought, could say. That was an unhappy time.

Looking at that short list, I imagine we might be better off with less government, or none, other than our own good sense.

But you don't trust your good sense, or more likely, your neighbor's good sense. We live in a society where the boss people are daily reminding us to live in fear. We want law and order, and we think that L&O hangs on rules, and strict enforcement of rules by people with guns and other ways to control.

Nah. Real order is what we make in our ring of family and friends. Not based on some system someone else dreamed up for us, but what binds all of us in this little--or not so little--group. Perhaps ultimately we can only live with love, a word I dislike because

it is so overused. Not "in love," but unconditional love, which simply means we accept that others are as we are, we share faults and talents. Unconditional love has nothing to do with liking another, or approving what others are and do. What it means is that we are completely aware that we need each other, we are part of each other and part of another whole -- a world of wholes all part of the great Whole. In our family, or village whole we accept each other as part of the family, the village, none better than another, none worse. Unconditional love even includes accepting that the men we contemptuously call terrorists must have reasons to do what they do. I want to understand what those reasons are. Talk as long as it takes; force never.

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As, of course, many others I am deeply concerned, frightened, by what is going on in the world. There too, the seeing of wholes seems important. It is not only wars, politics, and the latest version of that, which is government by idea (and it seems a particularly destructive idea), or the extinction of species, or even climate change, but also science and religion, the economy, finances, mortgages, traffic, TV-- all those things are interconnected. I see a disease (a syndrome) that has infected homo sapiens, humans, and through us--who we have become, what we do--threatens the balance (health) of the planetary ecology. Nobody knows how lethal this disease is to the planet; it is obvious that it affects and effects our species; it already has. The disease is now moving to its final fever. That line on a graph that first lingers, then slowly begins to move up, then faster and faster, steeper and steeper.

And